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Agenda item 117
Pattern of conferences

Career development in language services: the post of reviser

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Summary

The staffing tables of the translation services, sections or units at all conference centres provide for a revision capacity that allows for the revision of translations effected by junior staff and the revision of translations of important or sensitive material. It is the policy of the Secretariat to maintain that capacity intact.

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1. The General Assembly, in paragraph 26 of its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, requested the Secretary-General to ensure that the post of reviser was provided in the six official languages in accordance with paragraph 19 of section B of its resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997, and to report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-fourth session. It will be recalled that under the terms of section B, paragraph 19, of General Assembly resolution 52/214, the Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to reinstate the post of reviser in the six official languages. The present report is submitted pursuant to those two requests.

2. In view of the close relationship between the subject of the present report and the information already provided with regard to the availability of posts at the P-4 and P-5 levels in the report on career development in language services — including translation services — submitted to the General Assembly at its resumed fifty-third session (A/53/919), the document is being issued as an addendum to the aforementioned report.

The availability of reviser posts

3. At the outset, it must be emphasized that, contrary to what appears to be the premise for the request contained in section B, paragraph 19, of General Assembly resolution 52/214, the function of reviser was never abolished. Increased emphasis on self-revision in recent years has been a cause for growing concern on the part of delegations using documentation translated into the six official languages, but revision has remained all along the most effective method of quality control for translation.

4. In accordance with the job classification in effect before 1981, all language staff at the P-4 level in translation services had the functional title of "reviser". All language staff at the P-5 level in those same services had the title of "senior reviser". In 1981, the General Assembly decided that the staffing tables of the translation services at Headquarters and at the United Nations Office at Geneva should be restructured, in order to improve career prospects. This would be done by abolishing a number of P-2/P-3 posts and increasing the number of P-4 and P-5 posts (a "no-cost" measure that resulted in a net reduction of the overall number of posts, based on the assumption that capacity would remain unchanged through greater reliance on self-revision. Following the restructuring, the title of P-4 language staff in translation services was changed to "translator" and the title of P-5 staff became "senior translator". However, those changes did not take into account the fact that straight revision continued to represent a significant share of the duties of P-4 staff, and to constitute the main activity of P-5 staff; in the case of the latter, a review of individual output statistics conducted in 1998 confirmed that 61 per cent of the work produced by P-5 staff at Headquarters was straight revision. In 1998, the title of P-4 staff was changed again to "reviser/self-revising translator", following a review which showed that over 40 per cent of the work produced by staff at that level at Headquarters was revision work. At the same time, the title of P-5 staff was changed back to "senior reviser", to reflect the fact that revision work remained the mainstay of their duties.

Table 1
Share of revision work in total workload
(Percentage)

Duty station	*P-5 staff*	*P-4 staff*
Headquarters	60.2	39.4
United Nations Office at Geneva	42.0[a]	42.0[a]
United Nations Office at Vienna	77.9[b]	24.2
United Nations Office at Nairobi	–	20.4[c]

[a] Average share for staff at the P-4 and P-5 levels considered together.

[b] P-5 staff at the United Nations Office at Vienna have the dual function of Chief of Section and Senior Reviser.

[c] Percentage based on productivity statistics for 1998.

5. A detailed analysis of the availability of P-4 and P-5 posts in language services is contained in paragraphs 5 to 16 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/919). Table 2 illustrates the situation with regard to translation services at the four United Nations conference centres (Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi) in particular.

Table 2
Availability of senior reviser (P-5) and reviser/self-revising translator (P-4) posts

Office	*P-5 posts*	*P-4 posts*	*Total language posts (all levels)*	*Ratio of P-5 posts and P-4 posts to all language posts (percentage)*[a]
Headquarters (translation services)	53	133	301	61.8
United Nations Office at Geneva (translation sections)	24	63	156	55.8
United Nations Office at Vienna (translation sections)	6	23	45	64.4
United Nations Office at Nairobi (translation units)	–	13	19	68.4
Total	**83**	**232**	**521**	**60.4**

[a] The percentages show clearly that there is a large capacity for revision available.

Translations subject to revision

6. The criteria upon which decisions are made as to whether or not a given document or part of a document will be revised may vary from service to service, but common general guidelines apply in all cases. They are based on two factors:

(a) The skill level of the staff member who is translating the text. As a rule, all material translated by translators at the P-2 and P-3 levels is subject to revision. The only exceptions to that rule are the following:

(i) Cases where experienced P-3 translators are being trained for self-revision. After an initial period, during which their work is reviewed and evaluated by the training officer, and subject to satisfactory initial results, such translators are expected to perform part-time as self-revising translators. Their work is then spot-checked rather than fully revised;

(ii) Cases where an experienced P-3 translator with a high degree of expertise in a technical field, which is unmatched by any of the available revisers, is given full responsibility for the substantive accuracy of a technical translation falling squarely within his or her field of expertise. Revision, if any, is then limited to the stylistic aspects of the translation;

(b) The nature of the documents translated, regardless of the level of who translates them. The following categories of documents are subject to revision:

(i) All documents of a normative nature, such as draft declarations, plans of action, conventions, which undergo a final revision before their definitive version is adopted;

(ii) All important administrative issuances;

(iii) All draft resolutions. With the exception of those processed in the forward echelon and issued as "provisional", and some General Assembly draft resolutions processed overnight, all draft resolutions are subject to revision at the time of their initial submission. All material processed in the Forward Echelon is revised prior to final issuance. Furthermore, draft resolutions of the General Assembly are in any case revised prior to their inclusion in a Main Committee report. One or two senior revisers are responsible for the revision of all draft resolutions processed by each of the Main Committees of the General Assembly, so as to ensure maximum consistency;

(iv) Politically or otherwise sensitive documents. Subject to time constraints, sensitive documents, such as reports to the Security Council or reports from the Secretary-General containing important proposals, are revised, regardless of the level of the staff who translate them. When deadlines are tight, full revision is limited to those parts of a translated text processed by P-2 or P-3 translators, the balance being checked only for overall consistency. Exceptionally sensitive or otherwise important documents are reviewed by senior advisers, with a final check by the Chief of Service, when time permits.

7. Notwithstanding those guidelines, the general practice is that, whenever deadlines, workload and availability of senior staff allow it, documents should be translated and then revised, rather than self-revised. That policy has made it possible to bring the rate of self-revision in all services closer to the desirable range of 45 per cent.

8. In accordance with requests for the enhancement of the quality of translation made by the General Assembly in its resolutions on the pattern of conferences over the past few years, and in line with the strategy of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, the quality of translation is at the forefront of the concerns of conference services. In that connection, the revision function, which has been maintained as an essential element

of the working methods applied to the translation of documentation, will continue to play a major role. Accordingly, no curtailment of the revision capacity is reflected in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001, nor planned for the foreseeable future.

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Pattern of conferences

Career development in language services

Reducing excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations: the possibility of introducing a system of managed assignments

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Summary

A recent review of vacancy rates at all duty stations shows that by and large the language services at the United Nations Office at Vienna and in the regional commissions experience excessive vacancy rates. Direct assignment of newly recruited staff to those duty stations and calls for experienced staff at Headquarters to volunteer for assignments of several years in the field have not proven very effective in resolving this problem. Radical measures, such as establishing a system of managed assignments, may not be well-suited to the nature and the magnitude of the issue. Making assignments away from Headquarters more attractive, essentially through enhanced career prospects, is one alternative that the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services are reviewing in some depth.

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1. By paragraph 33 of its resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, a report on possible measures to alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and ensure the required quality of conference services Secretariat-wide.

2. In that connection, it will be recalled that at its substantive session held in 1998, the Committee on Conferences had requested the Secretary-General to submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences, a report on the possibility of introducing a system of managed assignments based on non-monetary incentives, which would alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and ensure the required quality of conference services Secretariat-wide. The present report is submitted pursuant to these two requests.

3. In view of the close relationship between the subject of the present report and the information already provided with regard to mobility between duty stations in the report on career development in language services submitted to the General Assembly at its resumed fifty-third session (A/53/919, paras. 19–23), the present report is issued as an addendum to that document.

4. A review of vacancy rates at all four United Nations conference centres and the regional commissions as at 31 March 1999 has been carried out. Its outcome is summarized in table 1.

5. As already noted in previous instances, the vacancy rates at Headquarters and at the United Nations Office at Geneva are comparable to, and in some cases better than, the overall rate recorded for the entire Secretariat, namely slightly in excess of 10 per cent for 1998 (see A/54/6 (Part one) (i)). On the other hand, with the exception of the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, significantly higher rates are recorded at duty stations with smaller language units. A breakdown of vacancies at those duty stations appears in table 2.

6. In Nairobi, the fact that out of 19 reviser/translator posts, 15 are extrabudgetary posts administered directly by the United Nations Office at Nairobi under the special delegation of authority given to the United Nations Environment Programme no doubt explains a deviation from the pattern of high vacancy rates at duty stations with smaller language services. To remedy the situation at those duty stations, a number of measures have been taken over the years, as outlined in the report on career development, such as direct assignment of junior translators to offices away from Headquarters after their recruitment and the completion of their training in New York and calls for volunteers in the Headquarters translation services for temporary assignments of two or three years at less-sought-after duty stations. However, it must be recognized that such measures have not been fully effective.

Table 1
Vacancy rates in language services (Professional posts only) (as at 31 March 1999)

Duty station language service	*Number of vacancies number of posts*	*Vacancy rate (percentage)*
Headquarters		
Translation and editorial	32/360	8 9
Interpretation	5/119	4 2
Verbatim reporting	0/53	0
Copy preparation	0/18	0
United Nations Office at Geneva		
Translation and editorial	21/170	12 2
Interpretation	10/84	11 9
United Nations Office at Vienna		
Translation and editorial	12/52	23 1
Interpretation	3/17	17 6
United Nations Office at Nairobi		
Translation and editorial	0/19	0
Economic Commission for Africa		
Translation and editorial	5/15	33
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific		
Translation and editorial	2/20	10
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean		
Translation and editorial	4/10	40
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia		
Translation and editorial	5/9	55 5

7. High vacancy rates in language services at duty stations other than New York and Geneva have been a lingering problem. In the face of the continuing difficulties encountered in filling those vacancies through reliance on the availability of volunteers for limited periods of service

at those duty stations, it was logical to consider the possibility of a stricter implementation of staff regulation 1.2 (c), which provides that "staff members are subject to the authority of the Secretary-General and to assignment by him to any of the activities or offices of the United Nations". Given the disproportion between the number of vacant posts to fill in the translation and editorial units at those duty stations (28 as at 31 March 1999) and in the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Vienna on the one hand (see table 2), and the numbers of translators and editors posted at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva (530 as at 31 March 1999) and of interpreters posted in those two offices (203) on the other hand (see table 1), it was important to develop objective and transparent criteria under which staff would be subjected to mandatory reassignment. Owing to the lack of such criteria, attempts at enforcing such a system in New York in the early 1970s were perceived by the staff concerned as discriminatory and caused a number of resignations, which disrupted the operation of some services at Headquarters.

Table 2
Vacancies, by level, in language services at duty stations other than New York and Geneva (as at 31 March 1999)

	Level				
Duty station language service	*P-5*	*P-4*	*P-3*	*P-2*	*Total*
United Nations Office at Vienna					
Translation and editorial	1	5	6	–	12
Interpretation	–	–	3	–	3
United Nations Office at Nairobi					
Translation and editorial	–	–	–	–	–
Economic Commission for Africa					
Translation and editorial	–	2	3	–	5
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific					
Translation and editorial	–	–	2	–	2
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean					
Translation and editorial	–	2	1	1	4
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia					
Translation and editorial	–	3	2	–	5
Total	**1**	**12**	**17**	**1**	**31**

8. With the adoption of General Assembly resolution 51/226 of 3 April 1997, the practice of mandatory assignment of staff members for service at some duty stations was significantly curtailed, as the Assembly had requested the Secretary-General "to announce all vacancies so as to give equal opportunity to all qualified staff and to encourage mobility, *it being understood that the discretionary power of the Secretary-General of appointment and promotion outside the established procedures should be limited to his Executive Office and the under-secretary-general and assistant secretary-general levels, as well as special envoys at all levels*" (emphasis added). While managers continued to draw the attention of their staff to vacancy announcements for posts away from Headquarters and encouraged suitable potential candidates to apply, the idea of mandatory reassignment without prior circulation of a vacancy announcement was abandoned.

9. Another alternative that has been the subject of discussions within the Secretariat is the possibility of establishing a system of rotation or managed assignments whereby at some point in their careers, all language staff at Headquarters, or conceivably at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva, would, without exception, be required to effect a tour of duty at one of the other duty stations. However, a number of constraints must be taken into account before launching such a system. One major consideration is certainly the very high price in terms of travel and installation costs of such a large-scale rotation scheme, which is all the more difficult to accept given that, contrary to what may be the case for some other professional groups, experience in the field does not prepare language staff for more demanding assignments later on at Headquarters. The greater diversity of the demands placed on translators, editors and interpreters at Headquarters, and the greater capacity there, within large services, for extended in-service training and quality control, are indeed essential factors for the improvement of the qualifications of language staff.

10. Another consideration, already referred to in paragraph 7 above, is the considerable imbalance between demand, in terms of a limited number of vacancies to fill at duty stations other than New York and Geneva, and supply, in terms of the vast pool of language staff posted at those two offices. Irrespective of costs, the disruption and the administrative work stemming from large-scale periodic assignments and reassignments must be measured in relation to the scope of the problem to be addressed.

11. In this context, the ongoing discussions between the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference

Services on the subject of the vacancy situation at duty stations away from Headquarters have focused less on the need to establish a new system, such as a managed assignment system, than on ways and means to make assignments at those duty stations more attractive, thus increasing the number of volunteers. One way is taking into greater account the mobility factor in the promotion process. As indicated in paragraph 9 above, experience in the field does not in itself increase the linguistic qualifications of language staff, but the willingness to accept assignments away from Headquarters at the cost of possible personal inconvenience denotes a sense of commitment to the goals of the Organization, which deserves recognition. In particular, it would be helpful to identify promising translators with a couple of years of experience at Headquarters who would be prepared to accept two-year assignments at one of the less-sought-after duty stations on the assurance that (a) they would be reintegrated automatically in their parent service after two years and (b) when posts at a higher level became available in that service after their return, special consideration would be given to their applications on account of their record of mobility. While such an approach appears practical a priori, the modalities for its implementation must be carefully weighed in order to satisfy the need to uphold the principle that promotions should be granted to the staff members who are the most competent and capable of performing satisfactorily at the higher level. Care should also be taken to avoid firm individual commitments that would jeopardize the integrity of the promotion process as it is currently defined by the Staff Rules. These modalities will be the subject of further discussions between the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services in the context of human resources management reform.